

Fremont, John C.

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John Charles Fremont, b. Savannah, Ga., Jan. 21, 1813, d. July 13, 1890, was an American explorer, soldier, and politician, best known as "the Pathfinder" for his western explorations of 1842-44. Following early military training, he married (1841) Jessie Benton, daughter of the influential Senator Thomas Hart BENTON. Fremont's prominence as an explorer began in 1842 when, with Benton's sponsorship, he was given the assignment of surveying the OREGON TRAIL up the Platte River to South Pass.

It was during his second expedition in 1843-44 that Fremont made the contributions to knowledge that were to secure his fame. On this expedition he made a massive circle of the least known parts of the West: from the Colorado Rockies north to the South Pass, northwest to the Columbia, south along the Cascade and Sierra Nevada ranges into California, and southward before turning east across the desert to the vicinity of Salt Lake and thence east across the Colorado Rockies. He returned to St. Louis in August 1844, after proving the existence of Salt Lake and a vast region of interior drainage (the Great Basin), dispelling the myth of the San Buenaventura River (supposed to flow from the Rockies to California), and demonstrating that the South Pass was the best route across the mountains.

In 1845, Fremont returned to California, where he encouraged the American settlers to revolt against Mexican rule and establish (June 1845) the BEAR FLAG REPUBLIC. In the ensuing dispute over command between Commodore Robert STOCKTON and Gen. Stephen KEARNY, Fremont supported the former and was consequently court-martialed for insubordination.

Fremont resigned from the army in 1847, but he continued his explorations with private backing. In 1850-51 he served as U.S. senator from the new state of California, and in 1856 he was defeated in the presidential election as the first candidate of the Republican party. At the start of the Civil War he was made commander of the Western Department, but he was removed after ordering emancipation of the slaves in Missouri on his own authority. He was then given command of the Mountain Division (1862) but resigned when subordinated to John POPE. Business failures, including a disastrous transcontinental railroad project, made Fremont a near-pauper. Congress finally granted him a pension for his explorations only three months before his death.

John L. Allen

Bibliography: Egan, Ferol, Fremont, Explorer for a Restless Nation (1930; repr. 1985); Jackson, Donald, and Spence, Mary L., eds., The Expeditions of John Charles Fremont, vol. I (1970); Nevins, Allan, Fremont (1955).



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Engraving by J. C. Fry; Chicago Historical Society

John Charles Frémont became famous as an American explorer, soldier, and political leader. He became the first candidate of the Republican party for President in 1856.

Frémont, JOHN CHARLES (1813-
d "The Pathfinder," explored
the Rocky Mountains and
in 1856, he was the first Republican
of the United States, but he lost
e served in the Army and Navy,
Senator from California.
int in the Army Topographical
d as a surveyor in the Carolina
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t Kit Carson, who served as the
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ky Mountains* described this trip,
utation.

Frémont explored part of the Oregon country in 1843. He visited Fort Vancouver, and then moved to the Carson River in Nevada early in 1844. From there he went to California, which was then a Mexican province. He returned to St. Louis in August 1844.

The third expedition, in 1845, was organized with the Mexican War in prospect. Frémont aroused the suspicions of the Mexican authorities in California, and they ordered him to leave. However, by the summer of 1846 he was inspiring discontented Americans in the Sacramento Valley to organize the "Bear Flag" revolt (see CALIFORNIA [Mexico Surrenders]).

Commodore Robert Stockton of the Navy and General S. W. Kearny of the Army became involved in a dispute over conflicting orders, and Frémont sided with Stockton. When Kearny won, he had Frémont court-martialed for insubordination (see KEARNY, STEPHEN W.). The Army dismissed Frémont from the service. President James K. Polk overruled the dismissal, but Frémont then resigned from the Army. He made a fourth expedition in 1848, but it failed. He then settled in California, and served as a U.S. Senator from September, 1850, until March, 1851.

Early in the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln gave him command of the Union Army's Western Department. But Frémont issued a proclamation taking over the property of rebelling Missouri slaveowners, and freeing their slaves. His act aroused the public and angered Lincoln, who transferred him to West Virginia. Later, he served from 1878 to 1883 as territorial governor of Arizona.

Frémont was born in Savannah, Ga., on Jan. 21, 1813, and studied at Charleston (S.C.) College. He married Jessie Benton, the daughter of the powerful Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, in 1841.